

VZCZCXRO0376
PP RUEHPT
DE RUEHBY #0530 1430208
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 220208Z MAY 08 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9606
INFO RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 0383
RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS PRIORITY 0268
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NICOSIA PRIORITY 0320
RUEHBN/AMCONSUL MELBOURNE PRIORITY 5274
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH PRIORITY 3556
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY PRIORITY 3471
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0644

UNCLAS CANBERRA 000530

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [AS](#) [CY](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER FM DOWNER MULLING ROLE AS UN SPECIAL ENVOY
FOR CYPRUS

11. (U) SUMMARY: The press carried reports on May 22 that former foreign minister Alexander Downer has been offered the job of UN Special Envoy for Cyprus. UN Undersecretary-General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe reportedly made the offer through Australia's UN Ambassador Robert Hill. According to the media, the Government and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd have given their in-principle support to the proposal. Downer confirmed to Australian news radio that he had been offered a position at the UN but maintained that he had not decided whether to accept the offer. END SUMMARY

12. (U) Two national newspapers reported in their May 22 editions that Alexander Downer, foreign minister under former PM John Howard and Australia's longest-serving foreign minister (1996-2007), has been offered the post of UN Special Envoy for Cyprus. According to the press, current Foreign Minister Steven Smith reportedly called Downer May 21 to relay the offer, and the Government's in-principle support. Downer subsequently confirmed to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) national news radio program that he had been offered a position at the UN but he said he has made no decision on the offer or even whether he would leave Parliament.

13. (SBU) Downer was reelected to his seat in Parliament in the 2007 election but with the defeat of the Howard Government he is now in opposition, and has no role in the Opposition's shadow cabinet. While there have been recurring rumors that Downer will resign from Parliament by the end of the year and join a consultancy in his home state of South Australia, he vigorously denied a statement to that effect by an Opposition spokesperson earlier this week. It is likely Downer has not yet decided what he would like to do. He told ABC radio earlier today that if he stayed on as an MP he would re-engage more with politics.

BIOGRAPHIC NOTES

14. (SBU) A Federal MP for almost 25 years, Downer served as Foreign Minister throughout the life of the Howard Government (1996-2007). He is a staunch supporter of the Australia-U.S. Alliance and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among the challenges he faced as Foreign Minister were East Timor's transition to independence, Australia's growing economic relationship with China, the Australian Wheat Board scandal, and the invasion of Iraq. Prior to becoming Foreign Minister, Downer was leader of the conservative Liberal Party and Opposition Leader from 1994-95. His tenure as leader was notable for a series of gaffes and missteps that significantly lowered his standing among political observers. He voluntarily surrendered the opposition leadership in 1995 to John Howard, who subsequently became Prime Minister in

¶1996. Downer was considered much more disciplined and effective as Foreign Minister than he had been as opposition leader and he became one of the Howard Government's most forceful advocates. In recent years Downer was one of Howard's closest confidants.

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